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SUBJECT: LEBANON: HARIRI'S VISIT TO TRIPOLI- THE BEGINNING
OF RECONCILIATION?

REF: BEIRUT 1284

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

1. (C) In a surprise three-day visit to the northern city of Tripoli, Sunni majority leader Saad Hariri encouraged rival factions in Tripoli to reconcile and overcome their differences. In an effort to lead by example, Hariri held talks with Alawite leader and former MP Ali Eid and former Prime Minister and opposition supporter Omar Karame. As a result, the evening of September 8, Sunni and Alawite leaders are expected to sign a cessation of fighting agreement. Hariri's visit was well received by most of Tripoli's political establishment, although others were more skeptical, citing its failure to address the underlying political issues. The September 8 agreement will present a positive first step. Overcoming Tripoli's political divisions will present a huge challenge to Hariri, but could be potentially beneficial if the situation remains calm in the lead-up to the 2009 parliamentary elections. End summary and comment.

HARIRI GOES TO TRIPOLI

2. (C) March 14 and Sunni majority leader Saad Hariri was in Tripoli September 5-7 on a surprise visit. While in Lebanon, Hariri does not often leave his Qoreitem compound in Beirut. (In fact, in the past six months, his only foray outside of Beirut was a March day-trip to Tripoli.) Hariri toured areas that had experienced sectarian fighting between Sunnis and Alawites and hosted an iftar during the visit (Note: Hariri told visiting NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary David Hale on August 31 that he would support Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) deployment to Tripoli, despite what he assessed could be political downsides (reftel). In the same meeting, Hariri also alluded to "new and different" things he was considering during Ramadan without specifically mentioning an iftar in Tripoli. End note.) Speaking at the iftar on September 6, Hariri urged the Alawites not to allow "foreign parties" to create sectarian divisions among them. In addition, he called the security of the Alawites "integral" to the security of Tripoli.

CESSATION OF FIGHTING
AGREEMENT PRINCIPLES

13. (SBU) At a September 6 midnight meeting, hosted by the Mufti of Tripoli and the North Sheikh Malek al-Shaar at his home, Hariri met with Alawite leader and former MP Ali Eid. The Hariri-Eid talks resulted in the creation of six-point plan for a cessation of fighting agreement between Sunni and Alawite factions in Tripoli. The plan includes:

- Agreement between all parties and leaders to maintain security, stability and peace and not to resort to violence under any circumstances;
- Asserting the importance of reconciliation between all the parties under the sponsorship of the state;
- Asking the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) command in the north to set a timetable for the return of all internally displaced persons to their homes and to secure their return;
- Securing temporary housing for those citizens who cannot return to their damaged homes;
- Asking the high relief committee to complete the assessment of lives and property lost in order to compensate those affected by the clashes; and,
- Asking the Prime Minister to work on obtaining the necessary funds for the plan's implementation.

Also in attendance at the talks were Eid's son, Rifaat, Hariri's Future Movement MP Samir al-Jisr, and Nader Hariri,

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Saad Hariri's advisor and cousin.

14. (SBU) The draft text of the agreement was circulated to concerned parties on September 7. It is expected the agreement will be signed in Tripoli the evening of September 8, with Prime Minister Fouad Siniora attending the ceremony. (Note: Siniora held a round of talks at the Grand Serail with Tripoli's political, religious, and civil society leaders on September 2 that also resulted in a six-point plan for achieving security and stability, and setting economic development goals. End note.)

PRAISE AMID SKEPTICISM

15. (SBU) Most of Tripoli's political leaders welcomed Hariri's visit and held high hopes for the agreement, amid underlying skepticism. Press report Minister of Economy and Trade Mohammad Safadi said Hariri was not a "stranger" to Tripoli and pledged to help him to "achieve reconciliation and promote moderation and openness." Former Prime Minister Najib Mikati called Tripoli a "moderate" city and said that all concerned parties had a "positive attitude" towards reconciliation. Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri phoned Hariri on September 7 and praised his efforts. Hizballah deputy Sheikh Naim Qassem termed the agreement a "good step."

16. (C) Less glowing, but supportive, statements came from the Mayor of Tripoli Rashid Jamali and Future MP Moustafa Allouch. Jamali said he welcomed the agreement, but remained skeptical about its implementation. Allouch, on the other hand, expressed concern to the embassy on September 8 that the agreement would only be limited to security matters, and does not address wider political divisions.

17. (C) For the first time since the assassination of his father Rafik Hariri in 2005, Saad Hariri met with former Prime Minister and opposition supporter Omar Karame while in Tripoli. Khaldun Charif, Karame's advisor, told the embassy September 8 that the meeting was excellent and said, "Hariri is trying to clean up the mess he created in Tripoli." Charif was referring to Hariri's alleged funding of some radical Sunni groups in Tripoli during the last three years.

Charif also disclosed that PM Siniora will attend the iftar Karame is hosting September 8 and they will go together to the agreement ceremony.

¶18. (C) Three-time Tripoli MP Mosbah al-Ahdab was extremely concerned that the agreement does not address weapons caches or how the LAF would take possession of weapons, two key issues, in his view. Al-Ahdab told the Ambassador on September 7 he refused to take part in the reconciliation meeting because he was not involved in the preparations. (Note: Al-Ahdab has been feuding with Hariri since the cabinet's formation on July 11. He has also told the embassy he is limiting his interactions with March 14. End note.)

¶19. (C) March 14 Christian MP Jawad Boulos criticized the agreement for failing to assert the state's authority. He argued that the GOL, rather than Hariri, should have negotiated the agreement to give the LAF the political cover to intervene. Instead, after Hizballah and the Palestinian camps (issues addressed in the National Dialogue), this would constitute a third exception to the LAF's ability to act to maintain stability, adding that he recently warned President Sleiman of the dangers of Lebanese shooting at each other. He relayed further that he also had told Internal Security Forces Chief General Ashraf Rifi that what was needed was a curfew to allow the security forces to go in and confiscate ammunition depots.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) The fighting in Tripoli has increased in recent months and there are many, unsubstantiated rumors circulating about whom -- and whose funds -- are stirring discontent, including Hariri, Mikati, Al-Ahdab, Hizballah, Saudi funds, and Syrian influence. The cessation of fighting agreement, if observed by the factions, would be a positive first step

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to calming the security and political situations in Tripoli. We believe Hariri's decision to visit Tripoli was timely given that several of our March 14 contacts bemoaned Hariri's absence during the summer. However, more will be required of Saad Hariri and the March 14 coalition to turn statements of positive support in Tripoli into votes in the spring 2009 parliamentary elections. (The Ambassador will meet with Hariri tomorrow, September 9. We will provide a readout septel.)
SISON